

DOING IT HIS WAY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

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The horde among them desired a craving, and they wept and said, "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free... but now our life is dry - we have nothing to look forward to but the Manna!" (11:4-6)"

Ostensibly, their complaint was a valid one. Even the simplest of eaters needs some variety in his diet. One could imagine that eating the same- old-Mon (Manna) every day could get a little tedious. Consider, however, that according to Chazal (our Sages) the Manna was able to adopt whatever taste its eater craved. You wanted steak, it tasted like sirloin. Salmon - poached or roasted? Would you like some desert? The possibilities are endless; Mon was a culinary chameleon! Bearing this in mind, what more could they have possibly desired?

There is one aspect of food-enjoyment that is even more critical than its chef, its spicing, its texture, even its taste. Appetite. The most exquisitely laid-out table with the most sumptuous of meals is meaningless - if not an exercise in frustration - when one has no appetite to eat.

Chazal teach an important lesson when it comes to desire: The more one gives in to one's desires, the more one yearns. And the converse: The more a person restricts his desires, the less one craves (Sukkah 52b). This, explains Meshech Chochma (using food as an example), is because the object of his desire contains within it the potential to beget additional desire. Just as the seed gives birth to fruit similar in all aspects to the fruit from which it comes, so too the more desirous the object, the greater its potential to make its consumer crave even more. The proverbial slope gets slipperier.

Historically there was one exception to this rule. Manna. Chazal describe Mon as a "spiritual food" - the nourishment of angels (Yoma 72b). In fact, after a few days of eating Mon, they no longer needed to use the "facilities" - it simply absorbed straight into the blood stream without any waste. The Mon, being wholly spiritual, had the converse quality of food; the more you ate, the less you desired. It came to a point that one no longer physically desired to eat at all. They continued to eat because intellectually they knew that without food they would die, but any pleasurable aspect of food consumption was gone.

This was their complaint: "True we've been given a food that can be just about whatever we want it to be - but we don't want it to be anything! We've lost all desire, and eating is no longer an enjoyable

experience but rather a chore!"

Sefas Emes perceives a more altruistic angle to their complaint. It's not that they missed the culinary contentment food used to bring them; they missed the inner struggle between desire and morality. Desire, in a sense, is the root of all evil, when allowed to take control and when given no boundaries. In its absence, not only does food become tasteless, but, to some extent, even being an ehrlicher Yid (good Jew) ceases to be a challenge. It was, says the Sefas Emes, not so much the food they yearned for but the challenge that yearning presents. This, he explains (as does the Meshech Chochma), is what the Torah means, "They desired a desire." Not, as we may have understood, that they desired the object of their desire, but rather they missed desire itself. It's no big deal to be good when there is very little driving one in the other direction.

This being the case, what was so terrible about their request?

It reminds me of the story of a certain exceptionally talented individual. This person can do everything; sing, dance, poetry, juggle, learn - almost everything he does he does exceptionally. Once, he was standing outside a wedding hall looking for a ride home. Someone stopped and offered him a ride. Recognizing his guest, the driver perked up. "Something wrong with your car?"

"No," he replied. "Actually, I don't drive."

"You're telling me you know how to do all those chochmas, and you can't even drive?! Driving's no chochma!"

"Exactly!" he said "If it was a chochma, I'd know how to drive too!"

The Jews felt it was no chochma to serve Hashem while under the influence of the Mon. There was no challenge, no nisayon (test). They wanted to feel challenged, and experience some difficulty in serving Hashem, so they asked for meat. In doing so they made a most critical error: They came with a preconception of how they wanted to serve Hashem, instead of serving Hashem the way He wanted to be served. They wanted being Jewish to be a chochma - but that's not how Hashem wanted it to be.

In fact, their personal agenda blinded them to the fact that they were indeed being tested. Their test was to deal with their boredom and the lack of usual challenge in dealing with the human condition. Consider the following: A strong learner finds himself in a yeshiva that has a high percentage of students weaker than him. As a result, he feels, rightly so, that the classes are not challenging enough for him. He wants to shteig in his learning, and feels his yeshiva is not giving him the opportunity to do so. On the other hand, his Rosh Yeshiva and rebbeim are telling him that he is a tremendous asset to the yeshiva, that he picks up the level of hasmada (studiousness), and is extremely helpful in assisting others weaker than him. Evidently his challenge, at least for now, is not to spend long hours diligently dissecting the most complex of pilpulim, but rather to deal with the boredom and lack of intellectual stimulation he is experiencing. This is not to say that he can not, at

some point in the future, change yeshivos; rather he must accept the challenges life (G-d) presents him in the present, instead of moping about being underchallenged and undermotivated. [Based on a shiur of Rabbi E. Breitowitz shlita]

A chassid, it is told, once came to one of the Gerer Rebbes with a complaint. "Rebbe, I have no parnassa (sustenance), my wife's is sick, and I'm constantly tired. How is one supposed to serve Hashem with peace- of-mind in this kind of life?!"

"Who says Hashem wants you to serve Him with peace-of-mind," was the rebbe's characteristically terse reply.

It is very easy for a person to go through life with a preconceived notion of the definition of what a test is, and the challenges he expects life to throw his way. Yet in doing so he's likely to often completely ignore the tests Hashem is actually sending, so blinded is he by his bias. When it comes to serving Hashem, the old refrain "I did it my way" is not necessarily what the Almighty desires.

Have a good Shabbos.

Dedicated in loving memory of Levi Yitzchak ben Avraham Leib. Ye'hei zichro baruch.

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